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Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War

Karl Walling

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security decisions are made and then undone. Gates puts it very well: “While the national security apparatus to deal with . . . problems is gigantic, ultimately they all had to be addressed by just eight people: the president, the vice president, the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the director of national intelligence, the director of the CIA, and the national security advisor.” *Duty* is an interesting window into the thoughts and actions of one of those eight.

THOMAS HONE

Formerly of the Naval War College, the Naval Air Systems Command, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense



Porch, Douglas. *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013. 434pp. \$23.88

Douglas Porch, military historian and academic, currently a distinguished professor of national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, has written a highly polemical and critical intellectual history of counterinsurgency, aka COIN. It has been selected by the Army chief of staff for his professional reading list, so it is a must-read, at least for Army officers, and more generally for those who follow a debate in which sobriety and balance are rare virtues.

According to Porch, COIN’s intellectual roots lie in nineteenth-century imperialism, which was often justified in paternalistic ways. Even today, COIN’s mission is to “civilize” indigenous societies by importing Western norms and practices that are often severely at odds with local custom or resented because they are imported at the muzzle of an

M16. Whether one considers the French in Vietnam and Algeria or the British in South Africa, Malaya, Palestine, Kenya, Ireland, and Northern Ireland (and elsewhere), the most common root of insurgency, according to Porch, is that other peoples do not wish to be ruled by foreigners. Population-centric operations (Porch does not call them strategies) designed to win hearts and minds have frequently failed, because insurgency is less about grievance resolution for a “biddable population,” as COIN proponents assume, than about ideology or political goals. War among the people thus often becomes war *against* the people, for a variety of reasons, beginning with the fact that Western counterinsurgents often assume, with good reason, that “the people” are in cahoots with the insurgents, who otherwise would be unable to operate. Therefore, counterinsurgents seek to divide indigenous societies in the colonial manner so as better to control them, which only undermines the modern state building that COIN advocates seek to achieve. Furthermore, a Western tradition that sees guerrillas and insurgents as terrorists and criminal assassins and not as lawful combatants has often led to illegal detention, torture, denial of food, extrajudicial execution, disappearances, concentration camps, and other counterproductive efforts to isolate the people from insurgents, gain intelligence, and break the will of the insurgents. In this way, Porch argues that even in victory COIN usually comes at a heavy moral price.

Porch also objects to COIN proponents’ seeing themselves as technicians, applying the “lessons” derived from historical cases, especially Malaya. By focusing on grievance alleviation as their central concern, these military officers engage

in “armed social work,” usually creating more problems than they solve. Often well-meaning reforms, like land reform, infrastructure improvement, power sharing, self-government, demands for less corruption, and so on, that form the staples of the COIN approach end up foundering because of the resentment of a foreign military presence. Many create dependence relationships with host nationals, undermine the sovereignty and legitimacy of local authorities, have negative economic impacts, or are wasteful.

Porch considers one of the most dangerous problems with an “armed social work” approach to intervention to be the politicizing of officers, by taking them out of their military roles and giving them civic and political responsibilities, in a process referred to as “civil-military fusion.” COIN proponents have often argued that the challenges of insurgency are so complex that military and political authority have to be fused. Officers, proconsuls really, have thus acquired forms of political power abroad that they would never be allowed at home. As they grew accustomed to wielding political power abroad, they sometimes grew contemptuous of political authorities at home, hijacking policy and thus damaging civil-military relations. Counter-insurgents in Algeria in the 1950s, for example, came to think that the French republic was a liability to the empire. To save the empire and the military’s reputation, they believed, they had to overthrow the republic—arguably the worst possible kind of breakdown of civil-military relations and a complete inversion of the Clausewitzian approach, which subordinates strategy and those who make it to policy and political leaders. So the greatest danger is what Porch, directly following the

philosopher Hannah Arendt and indirectly such thinkers as Edmund Burke and Thucydides, calls the “boomerang effect,” or the “revenge of the periphery”—that coercive COIN practices and methods worked out on distant battlefields often return home, in greater or lesser degrees, in the form of repressive measures inimical to free government.

This gets to the heart of Porch’s critique of COIN on strategic grounds. First, he argues that COIN is not a strategy but a collection of “lessons learned” and successful minor tactics that appear to be transferable across theaters, years, and cultures. This is especially true if special operations come to be seen as synonymous with COIN, so that it degenerates into a sort of decapitation strategy. Second, Porch holds, the case for making COIN a branch of special operations is weak. It assumes that the special operators are more adaptable than conventional forces, but Porch demonstrates that while adaptation is necessary in COIN, conventional forces are no worse (and sometimes better) at adapting than the special operators. Third, there is a serious danger in adapting too much in the direction of COIN. Had the United States gone whole hog on COIN in Vietnam, Porch suggests, it might have left itself even more unprepared than it was for Cold War conflict on the Central Front in Germany. Fourth, losers do not always give the best advice, and much of COIN theory is based on the prescriptions of losers—like David Galula, a veteran of the French war in Algeria, whose shadow looms large in the Army COIN doctrinal document, Field Manual (FM) 3-24. Porch shows that the French in Algeria actually followed Galula’s principles but ultimately lost. Why? Some of those principles proved

counterproductive in practice. Isolating the people from insurgents sounds great in theory, but if it requires putting significant numbers of the people in concentration camps or driving them into exile, it is likely to produce more enemies than friends. Moreover, the strategic context, the international, social, institutional, and economic environment, was stacked against the French, as it was for them before and for the United States later in Vietnam, and then again, some might say, in Iraq. In other words, COIN is not a magic bullet. When policy makers blunder into wars involving unpredicted insurgencies with unexpected strength and resilience, to think that COIN by itself can save them from the consequences of their policies is magical thinking at best. It would be far better to rethink the policies that caused the mess in the first place.

To be clear, Porch is not arguing that COIN is bound to fail strategically. Sometimes the context is favorable. Sometimes the insurgents have no allies or sanctuaries. Sometimes their cause has no popular appeal. Sometimes their leaders are inept or so brutal that they drive the people away from them. Sometimes the incumbents are competent, willing to adapt politically and militarily to meet the challenge. More often than Porch admits, counterinsurgents do win, but not because COIN is a form of warfare only special operators can understand. "War is war!" says Porch. A strategy appropriate to the context is the most important element in victory for both the insurgent and the counterinsurgent.

These concessions on Porch's part invite readers to take some critical distance from him. When counterinsurgencies go south, maybe the problem is less with COIN as such than with failure to assess

the strategic environment and adapt COIN doctrine to it. Some might object that this book is written in an angry spirit, highly polemical, and deeply one-sided. They might say that Porch has written two books, not one. The first is an intellectual history of COIN, in which the pattern of making the same mistakes occurs again and again; the second is a critique of special operations in general, one that seems unnecessary to Porch's argument and sometimes distracts from it. Plenty of insurgencies occur without the presence of foreign occupiers, so one cannot blame them or the problems of counterinsurgency on imperialism or paternalism alone. Porch is right that General Petraeus was lucky that the surge in Iraq coincided with the so-called Sunni Awakening against Al Qaeda and with other developments in Iraq, but strategic wisdom often involves taking advantage of good luck. If Petraeus's relative success in Iraq did not result directly from his personal role in redrafting American COIN doctrine and applying it intelligently to Iraq, it was nonetheless a vast improvement over the work of his predecessors, who did not plan for a potential insurgency and were slow to confront it—even occasionally aggravated it. Arguably the war in Iraq, a war of choice, was a strategic mistake, with American service members stuck cleaning up the mess until the U.S. government could find a dignified way to leave. Yet no less arguably, there was no alternative to intervening in Afghanistan, about which Porch says very little, because to fight Al Qaeda, which was sheltered by the Taliban, the United States in 2001 found it necessary to overthrow the government, though with a high probability that it would have to deal with an insurgency from the Taliban while fighting the terrorists.

Porch suggests no alternative approach for Afghanistan, so his critique has limited usefulness for evaluating U.S. strategy in that conflict. Afghanistan, indeed, is a very tough case for Porch's critique. It invites readers to ask whether problems there resulted from trying too much or too little COIN, while domestic support in the United States for the war was high before getting distracted with Iraq. Or perhaps the strategic context was so challenging that nothing better than a weak government in Kabul could have been expected—implying, perhaps, that after scattering Al Qaeda in 2001, the best realistic option would have been to withdraw quickly and turn the struggle over to whatever government the Afghans managed to establish, even if it did not meet many Western standards of good government. Or maybe the problem was that COIN doctrine can lead to unrealistic expectations that provoke precisely the kind of critique Porch has written. Had Porch focused more on what is necessary to make such expectations more sober—how he might have rewritten Army FM 3-24, for example—his book would have been improved substantially. Instead, those who rewrite that manual will have to take both Porch's book and more than a grain of salt into account in developing an approach to COIN that is genuinely sober in its expectations.

KARL WALLING
Naval War College Monterey Program



Shi Xiaojin. *Seapower and Sino-U.S. Relations*. Beijing: Military Science, 2013. 320pp. ¥42

Seapower and Sino-U.S. Relations is a comparative study of the quest for sea

power by nations that are considered “maritime power states” and “continental power states” and it is an attempt to apply related lessons to an understanding of current Sino-U.S. relations.

According to the author, traditionally maritime powers, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, have generally adopted a more offensive posture in their quest for sea power, mainly in terms of gaining “command of the sea” or in influencing development on the continent, as reflected in the works of American and British sea-power theorists Alfred Mahan and Sir Julian Corbett. The key to understanding Mahan, the author holds, is his emphasis on the aim of acquiring “absolute command of the sea” through decisive fleet engagement, which requires force concentration and capital ships capable of superior firepower. This central aim relegates other aims, such as sea-lane protection, commerce raiding, and naval blockade, and the building of capabilities requisite for them, to lesser priorities.

Mahan, however, is critically questioned by Corbett, Shi Xiaojin points out. Corbett, for instance, believes “absolute command of the sea” is neither possible nor necessary, because most of the seas, most of the time, are open and contested and accessible for productive use and exploitation. As a result, flotilla operations to protect sea-lanes may be important, but building capital ships for “decisive fleet engagement” may divert resources away from them. Also, the more the strong side wants a decisive battle through force concentration, the more incentive the weak side has to avoid such an engagement, through force dispersion to reduce losses. For Corbett, according to the author, sea control should also serve more useful